

For Growth in Faith and Mission

Upside DOWN

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Jesus, a Troublemaker?

"In this session we will explore Jesus' role as a troublemaker. We will also consider how the Holy Spirit has called and continues to call individuals to stir up controversy among believers so that the church can be reformed." With these words Bible study writer Carolyn Keller sets the stage for this month's Bible study session, and for this issue of LWT.

Jesus a troublemaker? It's hardly a comfortable thought for us. It challenges our tidy ideas and expectations for the kingdom of God. Jesus surprised the people of his time by extending grace and forgiveness to people who were considered outcasts—even enemies. And he continues to do so.

The Pharisees complained that Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners (see Luke 5:30). We've heard this verse so often that its shock value has been worn away by familiarity. Substitute some other names for "tax collector" and for "sinners." Somebody specific: Who does Jesus eat with today that really "gets your goat," that you wouldn't dream of breaking bread with? Are they members of a different political party than yours? People whose sexuality you don't approve of? People of other faiths, or citizens of a particular

nation? What if you saw Jesus eating in a fancy New York restaurant with that sort of person? Would that make you doubt Jesus? Would that shake up your thinking? **That's** what the Pharisees felt when they saw Jesus eating with tax collectors and sinners.

This issue of LWT explores the ways Jesus—and church reformers throughout the ages—worked to shake things up, to raise questions, to challenge people in their own times. Articles include a look at conflict in the church, the radical idea of forgiveness, and the question of what's it for. Some of these stories may make us feel uncomfortable, and some ideas we may decide to reject. But something here may turn our thinking upside-down and bring us to a fresh understanding of Jesus' life-changing presence in the world.

There are many astonishing images in the New Testament: camels flying through the eye of a needle, a handful of loaves and fishes feeding thousands, the temple curtain ripping from top to bottom in one dramatic moment. But perhaps nothing is as surprising—as amazing—as the person of Jesus and the message he brings to us, even today.

Kate Sprutta Elliott

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• For the benefit of Women of the ELCA participants, articles relating to Women of the ELCA mission areas are marked, at their conclusion, with these symbols: **A**=action, **C**=community, and **G**=growth.

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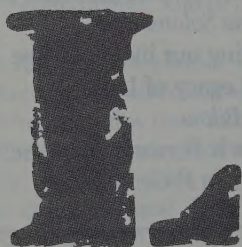
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Church Fights:

A SURVIVOR'S GUIDE

Michael L. Cooper-White



Like many Christians in our mobile society, I have been a member of several congregations. From time to time, each has lived through one or more seasons of conflict. Usually, the conflicts were relatively minor and centered around concerns like Christmas decorations or the wording of a constitutional amendment. At other times, however, there was great anguish and we fought over heavy-duty, gut-wrenching issues like human sexuality, the charismatic movement, or outreach to a new ethnic community in the neighborhood.

Some years ago, reflecting upon a dozen years as a synod staff person, I realized that more than half of the congregations I served had experienced major conflict at one or more points during my tenure. The leader at a seminar on consulting with congregations in conflict quipped: "Yes, indeed, church conflict is a growth industry!"

Normal and Widespread

The first point to be made about church fights, then, is that congregational conflict is normal and widespread. Recent congregational surveys by the ELCA's Department for Research and Evaluation revealed that about 42% have experienced a serious conflict in the past five years. According to reports by pastors and congregational council members surveyed, the parish conflict reported "has resulted, or has nearly resulted, in either the pastor or a significant number of members leaving the congrega-

gation." About 55% of those conflicts, in one way or another, involved "an issue of pastoral leadership." Of those surveyed, roughly one-third feel that disagreements are dealt with openly and are understood as a natural part of congregational life and growth. About 5% of pastors and council members say their congregation is in a perpetual state of conflict.¹

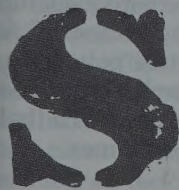
Painful and Stressful

Even though conflict is normal, it is still painful—and stressful. Our bodies send secret messages in the heat of a conflict: The pulse rate speeds up; we may feel a knot or burning sensation in the belly or break out in a sweat.

Conflict in the church is often particularly poignant. In part, this may be because of an unrealistic assumption that *Christian conflict* is an oxymoron. The church, the body of Christ, should always be a place of harmony, peaceful loving relationships, and the quiet, immediate reconciliation of any differences, right? Wrong!

From the Beginning

The earliest biblical accounts of the Christian community point to conflict from the outset. One needs only read the Gospels, or Acts, to discover that not only were Jesus and his followers in prophetic tension with the secular and religious authorities, they also were frequently in conflict among themselves. Most of the apostle Paul's epistles were forged in the smithy of conflict. His letters were in response to heated disputes in the early Christian communities—and Paul was not one to shy away from joining the fray in those early church fights.



So, what should we do to weather the storm of conflict in our congregations? Each situation is different, every congregation and its conflict unique. Prayerfully, you and the other members of your church will have to carve a path together through a jungle of turmoil

and conflict. From my experience as both a member of and consultant with congregations in conflict, let me share seven suggestions for surviving church fights. They may even help you grow in faith during a tense time.

Seven Suggestions for Surviving Church Fights

1. Listen. Listen. Listen! At the heart of many conflicts is plain old misunderstanding. Individuals or groups in the con-

1. Gretchen Olson, *A Profile: Facts About the Congregations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America*. ELCA Department for Research and Evaluation, 1994.

gregation simply are not hearing what others are saying. Careful listening often reveals that you and I really see things basically the same. Even if there is genuine difference of opinion, or a basic conflict in our values or understanding of God's will, listening carefully to each other will take us a long way down the road toward reconciliation, or simply toward agreeing to live with unresolved differences.

2. Try to understand the true nature of the conflict. Often the *presenting issue* is not the real cause of division and dispute. Some conflicts are simple differences of opinion over trivial matters like carpet color or where to plant trees. Other conflicts involve different ways of seeing the world or understanding the Bible and God's will. Deeply polarized conflicts of our basic values may be unresolvable. Those at odds will simply need to decide to live together without constantly trying to get the other to "come over to my side." In some extreme cases some members will need to leave the community and seek spiritual wholeness in another congregation.

3. Seek to learn about the dynamics of conflict. Because conflict is so prevalent—not only in the church, but also in every arena of society—many helpful books and articles have been written about this subject in recent years. Instruments are available to help us identify our own styles of dealing with conflict. How we fight in the church probably mirrors the way we handle disagreements within our families, in the workplace, or in other group settings.



relatively new approach to creative conflict utilization is called "managing polarities." As metal filings center around one pole or the other of a magnet, so in a church conflict people tend to move to extreme positions. The balanced life often requires living in between two extremes.

4. Honor, respect, and engage directly with your duly chosen leaders, both lay and clergy. Chaos often cripples a conflicted church as members begin to disregard and ignore those they have chosen as leaders. Pastors, officers, and council members are often rendered ineffective and unable to foster healing if their leadership is swept aside by a well-meaning but undermining "rump group." Obviously, if unethical behavior on the part of one or more leaders is a factor in the conflict, others may need to rise up and challenge the behavior while continuing to respect the other's dignity as a child of God.

5. Do your best to communicate clearly and directly. In a time of conflict, there is often a great deal of unhelpful *triangulation*.

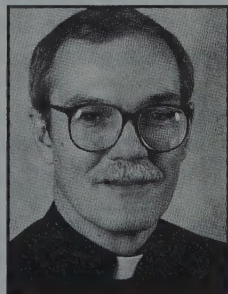
This means that rather than talking with Jane about our differences, I talk with Bill and seek him as an ally against her. Passing along unreliable or hurtful information can fuel a conflict. Let the rumor mill stop with you! Use words to build up rather than tear down your sisters and brothers in the community of faith. While respecting confidences, strive as much as possible to avoid creating a climate of secrecy wherein some members are "in the know" while the majority is kept in the dark.

6. Seek help when needed. Often conflict can be worked through following biblical principles, especially as outlined in Matthew 18. In some situations, however, help from outside the congregation is a must. Cases such as abuse by key leaders, or serious conflict within the congregational council or between pastor and officers are so emotionally laden that no one inside the system can mediate and provide perspective. Your bishop should always be informed by congregational leaders if there is serious conflict. A paid consultant may be recommended for situations where an in-depth and long-term conflict resolution and reconciliation process is needed.

7. Pray. Pray. Pray! At the foot of the cross and in front of the empty tomb of Jesus, one gains perspective. Christ died and God raised him from the dead for *all* who are involved in the present conflict. Study the Scriptures to learn from the experiences of those early survivors of conflict who spread the gospel to all the world in spite of difficulties and internal squabbles. Take care of yourself, especially if you are at the center of controversy or feel yourself maligned and misunderstood. And trust that you *will* survive, the congregation will survive, and the mission of the church will go forward as it has done through the centuries filled with many, many conflicts within the body of Christ. **CG**

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APOSTLE PAUL
was not one to shy away
from joining the fray in
those early church fights.



Conflict in Our Congregation

LWT readers were asked to share stories of conflict experienced in their congregations. While some stories were sad and troubling, there were glimmers of hope and gratitude—and a deep faith in God's care for them—even in difficult situations.

The names of all the authors have been changed -ED.

DISHARMONY

Disharmony at my church was caused by disagreement about the way things should be done. The congregation has a lot of longtime members who are used to doing things certain ways. When a different pastor arrived, he was just as adamant about doing things his way, which he considered "the right way."

Some things the pastor could have given in on—like the tune a hymn was sung to, or how communion was served. Some things I think the congregation would have accepted if he'd given members time to get used to them. If he'd said, "Why don't we consider doing this at a baptism?" people might have decided to try something new. Instead, he barreled ahead, insisting things be done his way.

Another source of conflict was the congregation's insistence on planning fundraising events and other activities based on the stay-at-home-mother model. Some complained that they always had to do the work. Wasn't it time for "the younger ones" to take over? The younger ones were women

There is a definite commitment to "faith active in love."

employed full-time during the hours these events were scheduled to take place.

There was also a sort of insular "take-care-of-ourselves first" approach to finances, with little congregational or personal commitment to mission and community concerns. The church became a comfortable cocoon from which no butterfly would emerge.

There has been no solution or resolution. Some people have chosen to become less involved in church committees and activities, limiting their membership to Sunday church attendance. Others have decided to come to church less often. A few, like me, have decided to find another church where every committee meeting is not a battleground, where there isn't a constant undercurrent of discord, and where there is a definite commitment to "faith active in love."

Cindy, Wisconsin

CRISIS

We were new to the area and reached out to the church. The pastor welcomed us enthusiastically, but only a handful of people made up the congregation. "What is wrong?" we wondered.

When the pastor visited us the next week, he admitted there were some problems, but hoped they could be rectified. With his encouragement, we eventually joined. The following month the pastor resigned.

We decided to attend church the Sunday after the announce-

ment of his resignation. To our surprise the church was filled to capacity, mostly with unfamiliar faces.

The congregation's reaction to the pastor's resignation stunned me. I vowed not to go back. We visited other churches, some of other denominations, but we couldn't say yes to their membership.

Finally, we decided to return to our new church. Time heals, and certainly prayer helps. Each week I felt a softening of my thoughts and I began to see the congregational members in a new light, but only after I learned about the problems they had experienced.

It seems this was the third time the church had encountered serious conflict in the 10 years the pastor had been there. The latest problem centered on a special charismatic program that some of the members were in favor of. The pastor didn't agree with everything about it, so he refused to support it. Instead of trying to work through the difficulties, as in times past, he let the dissatisfied members leave, and then brought in new members to replace them. This time though, some of the members thought more had to be done to unite the congregation that was there.

A committee of concerned members was formed, and through their efforts the bishop and his committee were called in to interview the church's members individually. The results were analyzed and the deci-

sion was made that the pastor should resign.

Over the years since, the church has grown in membership and programs with their new pastor, who now has been there 12 years. They have built a new facility, called an associate pastor, and started a Christian day school. The former pastor has thrived in his new location, as well.

Jill, North Carolina

VISION

In 1992 our church confronted a division of opinion, and longtime members left our fellowship. The division resulted from two factors: A change of pastoral staff and the unwillingness of certain members to change the ministry of the church.

Two senior pastors had served over the first 34 years of ministry, both of whom retired. A call was accepted by a husband/wife team of pastors. The call committee, aware a female pastor would add a different aspect to worship and ministry, felt it would make a positive difference. Some members of our congregation stated that if the female pastor did a function of the worship service such as lead the creed, or visit the sick, then the act was not done by THE pastor. Her ordained call was not accepted as valid.

The division was exacerbated as the new pastors expressed their vision for our congregation. One issue involved inviting another Christian denomination to worship in our unused facilities. As this discussion was brought to the congregation, the point of divisiveness was

obvious. After the vote not to allow this other congregation to use our facility, the dissatisfied members began to call for the removal of the new pastors. They picketed and attended the worship services, harassing others who supported the pastors. They harassed the pastors with anonymous letters and phone calls.

Through proper channels, the grievances were discussed with the bishop's office, and a vote was held to retain or remove the pastors. The pastors were affirmed in their call by an overwhelming margin. The dissenting members left the church after that meeting.

As I look at things now, I know that the confrontation helped move us toward the positive, loving atmosphere that we have in our fellowship. We look for ways to improve our worship and connection to the

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community, and are not afraid of change. We have invited other churches to share our facility, and the arrangement has been beneficial to all. We are more open about our concerns and support diversity of ministries. We are serving a bigger God than we did five years ago.

Terry, Arizona

When to affirm? When to rebel?

What's It For?

David L. Miller

Blessed are they who know what things are for. They know what to rebel against.

If you're typical, you begin asking a simple question while still at a tender age: "What's it for?" Simple. When we were little, we were so good at asking this question: "What's that for, Mom? What's it do?"

It's a great question. It pries open worlds unknown. It un.masks mysteries. And it loads us with power to do right and to make right. Especially when we move beyond asking, "What's this tool, this class, this equation for?" and begin to ask bigger *what-fors*: What's my friend for? What's the government for? What's my church for?

And then there's that ultimate what for: What am I for? Why do I live and breathe and have this being at this time and this place? If you know this what-for, you have some idea of what to do and where to go with your life. And you know what—in your self, your family, your church, your town, your government, your culture—you should reject and rebel against.

But if you don't know that what-for, you're a rebel without a clue. Your rebellion is sheer willfulness, one more power play with no real purpose other than to show that you won't be pushed around.

So, a deep awareness of what things are for is a blessing of God to be devoutly sought, prayed for, and sweated





over. But how can you know “what for?” Fortunately, God is greatly interested in letting you know. God’s Word is quite clear about it.

For example, take the day Jesus entered the temple in Jerusalem, his people’s holiest place, where they came to meet God.

Jesus angrily started throwing people out, overturning tables, catapulting chairs, sending coins clattering and jangling across the stone courtyard in the outer temple precincts. “It is written, my house shall be called a house of prayer,” he said, quoting a verse from Isaiah. “But you have made it a den of thieves,” he

concluded with a verse from Jeremiah.

You can read about this event in each of the four Gospels. But I especially like what the Gospel writer Matthew includes in his retelling of the story.

According to Matthew, immediately after Jesus drove the buyers and sellers from the temple “The blind and the lame came to him..., and he cured them” (Matthew 21:14). Only Matthew offers us this not-so-minor detail.

The same is true of what happens next. Seeing Jesus healing the sick and infirm, the children cry “Hosanna to the Son of David.” The priests and religious authorities angrily insist that Jesus stop the children. They knew the children’s words were not casual flattery. Children were announcing that Jesus was the Messiah sent from God to bring the blessings of God’s kingdom, God’s rulership—right there and then.

What do we make of this? First, Jesus knew what things were for. He knew the temple was not for commerce. He knew it wasn’t there to stroke the egos of priests or the outwardly good and righteous, who could enter and offer sacrifice. It was to be a place of prayer where God blessed and offered wholeness to the people, including those like the blind and lame who were pushed to edges of life. Their troubles made them less than whole in their society and unwelcome in the inner parts of the temple.

Knowing this, Jesus rebelled against the buying and selling and the exclusion of those who sorely needed healing.

His rebellion against temple practices was not just to tear down or destroy. It was the natural act of one who knew what things are for. Jesus was not destroying tradition but revealing its deepest meaning: The temple was the place God comes to the people to heal and to bless.

There's yet a deeper truth here. Jesus' healings give the blessings of God's end-time kingdom *now*. Certainly this is true of the healings in the temple. There he showed God's rule and victory over all the powers that destroy or undermine God's blessed creation. Jesus also rebelled against the temple practices because they obscured—instead of illumined—God's kingdom.

Here, then, we find the basis for our decisions about what to affirm and when to rebel: Does this practice express God's rule as we see it in Jesus? Does it make you and others more loving toward God? Toward others? Does it help renew God's creation, put things back together, make them whole?

Your life is a word God speaks from eternity into time. You are built to be an expression of God's delight in, and care for, all that is made. That's what you are for. Our congregations are given to express—in word and deed—that same delight and care. That's what they're for.

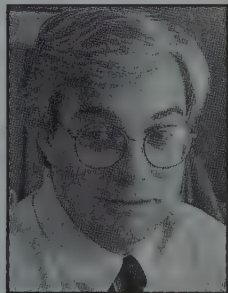
Too often we forget that, and our lives get caught up in pettiness and willfulness. Sometimes we affirm what we affirm because it serves our present need to get what we want. And we rebel when something grates on us, disappoints us, or prevents us from getting our own way.

The same is true of our congregations. How many times do we refuse to open our doors to outside or community groups largely because we fear things might get messed up? And how many church conflicts start when someone fears someone else is getting more attention or more power?

Not long ago, I learned of a congregation fighting over whether a youngster should be confirmed. He hadn't completed all his sermon notes. Fortunately, the pastor worried less about requirements than about finding extra support and encouragement for this youngster who had no parental support. The pastor remembered what confirmation ministry is for, and in the process she just might have saved one young life for Christ.

So, blessed are they who know what things are for, who know what to affirm and when to rebel. Blessed are they. By seeing the forest, they keep the rest of us from getting lost in the trees. **AGC**

David L. Miller is a senior editor for The Lutheran.



A pearl of great price

Why I Stay



Joan D. Chittister

**"It is good to have an end to
journey towards,"** Ursula Le
Guin writes, "but it is the journey

that matters in the end."

The truth of this statement explains how it is possible necessary even, for me as a Roman Catholic to stay in a church that is riddled with inconsistencies, closed to discussion about the implications of them, and sympathetic only to invisible women. The fact is that over the years I have come to realize that church is not a place; it is a process. To leave the church may, in fact, be leaving part of the process of my own development. And so, intent on the process of grappling with truth, I stay in it, even when staying in it, for a woman, is full of pain, frustration, disillusionment and, far too often, even humiliation. Both of us—this church and I—have need to grow. The church needs to grow in its understanding of the gospel, and I need to grow in my understanding of myself as I strive to live the gospel. It is, in other words, a journey of conversion for both of us.

There is also a model for the staying that lurks within me—prodding me in hard times to trust my questions, accusing me on difficult days of prizing weakness more than truth, consoling me in hard times with the courage of endurance, and inspiring me always to keep the faith whatever the weakness of the system that heralds it. What haunts me are the memories of Jesus contesting with the Pharisees, weeping over Jerusalem, teaching in the synagogue, presiding over the Seder on Holy

Thursday. My models are clear: Jesus proclaiming his truth whatever the situation, whatever the cost; Jesus grappling with the depression that comes from failure, from rejection; Jesus trusting the truth, living in faith and hoping to the end.

Those models make the rest of the journey clear to me. When the church has little time for women's presence, when the church takes little notice of women's questions, when the church holds little respect for women's insights, when the church devotes itself to preaching the gospel of equality for women but preserves a male theology and a male system, staying in the church demands a purpose far beyond ourselves.

I stay in the church as a restless pilgrim not because I don't believe what the church has taught me, but precisely because I do. I believed when they taught us that God made us equal and that Jesus came for us all. I believed in the Jesus they showed me: the Jesus who listened to women and taught theology to them, the Jesus who sent women to teach theology and raised women from the dead. So today I believe that the church—if it is ever to be true to that same gospel—must someday do the same: It must commission women as Jesus did the Samaritan woman, listen to women as Jesus did the Canaanite women, raise women to new life as Jesus did the daughter of Jairus.

I stay in the church as a restless pilgrim not because I don't believe what the church has taught me, but precisely because I do.

I stay in the church because there is nowhere else I know that satisfies in me what the church itself teaches us to seek—a sacramental life that makes all life sacred, a community of faith that celebrates life together, a proclamation of the image of God alive in each of us, a contemplation of truth that makes life meaningful. I know clubs and societies and congregations of deep sincerity who do great good. The problem is that I need, in the core of my humanity, sacrament and common faith. I need a sense of the divine as much as I need good talk, good works, and good intentions.

I stay in the church because, though the lights have gone out in parts of the house, I know myself to be at home. I realize now with penetrating anger how sexist the church itself really is, whatever its professions of faith in Jesus and love for women. But I also realize that this is the family I was raised in. This is the family that gave me my first images of God, my first feeling of human

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worth, my first sense of holiness, my first invitation to a goodness measured by more than "success." Just because a family is dysfunctional—as this one is—does not make it less family. If anything, we must work harder to bring all of us to health in it.

I stay in the church because I have the support from other women, from feminist men, from a women's community that enables me to worship with human dignity and a sense of theological inclusion. Otherwise, I do not know how it would be possible to stay. At the same time—because I know my own need for the strength of a conscious and understanding community—I have come to understand and honor those who, lacking that kind of support, choose to leave the church. For many, church-going has become more an experience of systemic devaluation than spiritual growth. After years of waiting for change, then, they have chosen to try to find God by themselves rather than be

excluded by the community from the common search. These are the women in whom beat a Catholic heart but, like many other abused or belittled woman, they get to the point where, for their mental health, they say with pain and still with love, "I will not divorce you, but until this changes, I cannot live under the same roof."

I stay in the church for the simple reason that because it has come through so much already, I know it can come through more. This is the church that finally repented the Inquisition, eventually, at least, accepted Galileo, at length stopped selling relics, in the end, caught up with Martin Luther, and at long last embraced an ecumenical movement. Among other things. This is a church that has known sin and regretted it. A church that has the potential, the credentials, to understand my sin, as well.

I stay in the church, wiser now, less idealistic, more balanced in my hope for instant change, more spiritually mature myself, perhaps. In the first two weeks of my initial trip to Rome in 1972, I was appalled by what I saw there: the pomp, the posturing, the oppressive and arrogant sense of power that seeped out of every office, hung over every meeting, colored every ritual. I was young and intense. I had, I thought, lost my faith. I wanted

never to go back there. "Patientia, patientia," an old monastic counseled. "You will come back and you will grow to understand...." The sentence trailed off into irritating nothingness. Understand what? But by the end of the next two weeks—and the next 15 years of meetings there—I came to understand its meaning for myself. I grew to realize that for those whose faith is mature, only God is God. Not the institution. Not the system. Not the history. Not the pope. God is in the church, not in the chancery. The church is a vehicle for the faith, not the end of it.

Finally, I stay in the church because the sexist church I love needs women for its own salvation. The truth it holds, women test for authenticity.

We are sanctifying one another, this church and the women who refuse to be silent or suppressed. What each of us sets out to convert will, in the end, convert us as well. Women will call the church to truth. The church will call women to faith. Together, God willing, we will persist—women despite the madness of authoritarianism, and the church despite the irritation of unrelenting challenge. We will endure together. We will propel ourselves to the edges of our potentials for holiness.

"Why does a woman like you stay in the church?" a

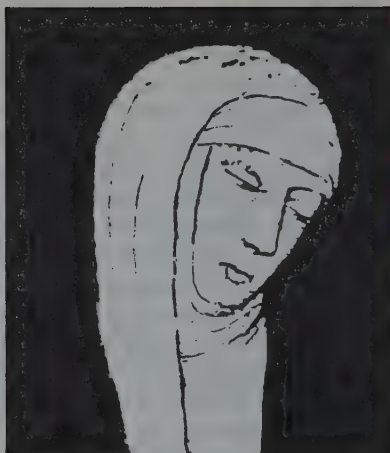
woman asked me from the depths of a dark auditorium years ago. "Because," I answered, "every time I thought about leaving, I found myself thinking of oysters." "Oysters?" she asked. "What do oysters have to do with it?" "Well," I answered her in the darkness of the huge auditorium, "I realized that an oyster is an organism that defends itself by excreting a substance to protect itself against the sand of its spawning bed. The more sand in the oyster, the more chemical the oyster produces until finally, after layer upon layer of gel, the sand turns into a pearl. And the oyster itself becomes more valuable. At that moment," I said, "I discovered the ministry of irritation."

I stay in the church with all my challenge and despite its resistance, knowing that before this is over, both it and I will have become what we have the capacity to be: followers of the Christ who listened to women, taught them theology, and raised them from the dead. **G**

Sister Joan D. Chittister is executive director of Benetvision: A Resource and Research Center for Contemporary Spirituality. She is a member of the Benedictine Sisters of Erie, Pennsylvania, and a widely published author and noted national and international lecturer.



The Reformers



Catherine of Siena

Beverly J. Stratton

Who are the reformers in the church?

Reformers change the ways things are looked at—like Copernicus, who put the sun rather than the earth at the center of the solar system. Reformers help bring about new patterns or ways of seeing things, sometimes called *paradigms*. Church reformers imagine and help bring about new ways of thinking about who we are in relation to God.

St. Paul knew something about being a church reformer. When he recognized that God had done a new thing in the death and resurrection of Jesus, he struggled to work out the meaning of the law and God's relationship to Gentiles and the non-believing Jews.

Luther shifted several paradigms: from clinging to authority in

traditions and church teachings to "Scripture alone." From a hierarchical priesthood and special religious orders for monks and nuns to the "priesthood of all believers." From saints and other mediators to "Christ alone." From reliance on works and the selling of indulgences to "grace alone."

Sometimes reformers bring synthesis out of conflict, like Thomas Aquinas, whose teaching bridged Greek philosophy with Christian theology. Oftentimes, reformers turn the world upside down (note Acts 17:6). In the 1950s and 1960s, Martin Luther King Jr. and Rosa Parks organized nonviolent resistance efforts that led to civil-rights and voting-rights legislation for African Americans.

Reformers call hypocrisy what it

is (see Galatians 2:11-14), and they refuse to compromise when the gospel is at stake (see Galatians 1:6; 5:12). Under excommunication and threat of death as an outlaw, Martin Luther refused to recant at the Diet of Worms in 1521, proclaiming: "Here I stand. I can do no other."

Reformers today challenge us to consider ways that our political and economic systems cripple the poor. They call us to imagine new systems where policies are judged—as the biblical prophets insist—by how they affect the poorest among us.

Reformers are not usually born to the task, and their lives are not always saintly. Moses was a murderer; Augustine lived with a woman and their son for more than 12 years before his conversion; Luther used less-than-saintly language. Reformers have their blind spots. In his later years, Luther wrote hateful words against the Jews, only recently repudiated by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, whose *Woman's Bible* of 1895 inspired much recent feminist biblical scholarship, was racist and advocated women's suffrage to squelch Black men's votes. The apostle Paul is often criticized for not seeing beyond the gender roles and social practices of his time—including slavery.

Reformers are not usually born to the task, and their lives are not always saintly.

Like the prophets of the Old Testament, reformers may argue against their calling, even fight against God, and be won to a cause when the time is right, or when a blinding vision or voice from heaven permits them no alternative (see Acts 9:3-5).

Reformers are steeped in the Word, concerned for the people of their time, confident in God's love and grace, and eager to proclaim the good news. Paul, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, and Luther were all students and teachers of Scripture. In the fourth century, Paula helped Jerome translate the Bible into the Latin *Vulgate*. Though illiterate, former slave and abolitionist Sojourner Truth memorized Scripture and preached powerfully from it. A convert to Christianity, Ramabai learned Greek and Hebrew in order to translate the Bible for the women of India whom she supported in communal living.

Often embroiled in controversy, reformers challenge official religious policies and practices, insisting on the universality of God's love and working for the unity of the

church. In the 1300s, Catherine of Siena used her diplomatic skills and blunt words to reunite the papacy. Like the prophets and apostles, reformers are compelled to speak the truth—even if the unity of the church is threatened. They are zealous for their God and the cause of the gospel. They are adamant that nothing hinder this good news. They consider less vital matters as *adiaphora*, that is, things about which Christians may disagree.

Following centuries of earlier attempts at reform, Luther called on the Catholic church to stop the practice of indulgences. Dietrich Bonhoeffer formed the German

Lutheran “Confessing Church” to fight Hitler’s policies of extermination of the Jews. Barbara Harris, now an Episcopal bishop, led a group of women being “irregularly ordained” as priests in the Episcopal Church in 1974.

Reformers often suffer for their positions.

Reformers often suffer for their positions. Luther lived in exile for taking a stand against the pope and the abuses of the

Roman Catholic church of his time. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was imprisoned and executed for opposing Hitler. Civil-rights leaders in the United States were arrested. Laywoman Jean Donovan was sexually assaulted and shot when her faith led her to work among the poor in El Salvador. At the end of 1995, two congregations in San Francisco were expelled from the ELCA for going against church policy in their ordination of pastors.

Reformers are often social activists. In the fourth century, Macrina of Cappadocia joined social welfare to monasticism. During the Crusades, Margaret of Scotland instituted the “grace cup” to promote prayer after meals among the knights. To curb pillaging by the soldiers, Margaret brought church leaders together to discuss church policy, fostering reform without ruffling feathers. As part of monastic reform, Clare of Assisi established a Third Order for those following the Franciscan way of life while living at home.

Reformers find a way to do what needs to be done. Catherine of Siena visited prisoners before their executions, nursed the sick during the plague, and provided food and clothing for the poor. In the early 1800s, Joanna Bethune and Isabella Graham founded the first Sunday schools to educate and evangelize the poor. During the Civil War, Clara Barton nursed the soldiers and eventually founded the Red

Cross. When African Americans were being lynched in the Civil War's aftermath, Ida B. Wells launched the first anti-lynching campaign by writing an article for a Baptist weekly newspaper. In this century, Dorothy Day founded the Catholic Worker Movement, publishing a paper and opening hospitality houses across this nation. Immigrant women in the United States raised families and founded or joined several "First English" parishes, reforming the church for their children.

The church of Christ survives in every age not only because of the unflinching commitment to the gospel by devoted Christian reformers, but because the Spirit of God leads an "always reforming" church continually to claim and test our heritage (*Lutheran Book of Worship* 433). May the God of grace and glory grant us wisdom and courage for the living of our days so that we may understand the gifts we bring and the tasks we face as members of a reforming church. **G**

Beverly Stratton focuses her reforming efforts at Augsburg College, where she is associate professor of religion. She is a member at St. Michael's Lutheran in Roseville, Minnesota.

For Further Study:

Great Christian Thinkers, Hans Kung, Continuum, 1994.

With Minds of Their Own: Eight Women Who Made a Difference, Boniface Hanley, Ave Maria Press, 1991.

Reforming Church: Gift and Task: Essays from a Free Conference, Charles P. Lutz, ed., Kirk House Pubs., 1995.

Readings in Her Story: Women in Christian Tradition, Barbara MacHaffie, ed., Fortress Press, 1992.

Women of Faith: Portraits of Twelve Spirit-Filled Women, Grace Stageberg Swenson, North Star, 1991.

Women in Church History: Twenty Stories for Twenty Centuries, Joanne Turpin, St. Anthony Messenger Press, 1990.

Check your local library, church library, or bookstore for these titles.

Who, Me? A Pharisee?

Daphne Hamborg

Because we are who we are, the thought is an unpleasant one: We consider ourselves among those who have learned—from the Pharisees—how not to live.

In fact, our impressions of the Pharisees may be clearer than our impressions of any other group in the Gospels. The Pharisees were those who tried to trick Jesus, who readily challenged him, who rejected his teachings of grace and graciousness, who helped bring him to his death. Our list of wrongs they committed seems to be a long one, and we don't like considering their place within ourselves.

When I was a seminarian, and David Tiede (now president of Luther Seminary) was a New Testament professor, he and I and few others were sitting around the cafeteria one day, drinking coffee. (I associated with a group who saw coffee-drinking as its favorite avenue of learning.) I think we were actually discussing the book Dr. Tiede was writing,

but whatever the context, I still remember a comment of his: The Pharisees were actually a great deal like Lutherans—intrinsically conservative and deeply interested in the influence of faith on daily life.

And I still remember my surprise. I had never considered the similarities between these two groups. I also had never considered that something positive existed within the framework of Pharisaic spirituality. The conversation softened me a bit.

Who were the Pharisees?

They were actually a group of Jewish reformers, unhappy with the religious expressions that surrounded them most closely. In particular, the Pharisees were unhappy with the more liberal theology of the Sadducees—who rejected belief in a resurrection and who were not particularly interested in personal piety. The Pharisees were also unhappy with the activism of such groups as the Zealots—who seemed far more interested in the overthrow of Rome than in the coming of the

Messiah. Neither group, to the Pharisees, seemed interested in the restoration of scriptural faith.

The Pharisees were actually similar to the Lutheran pietists who followed them some 17 centuries later. They longed to light the fires of faith—a faith not only of the mind but of the heart. Such a faith was rooted in a life of careful devotion. The rules that Jesus broke and that the Pharisees clung to were not arbitrary. They were guidelines for faithful living.

Along the way, something happened to the Pharisees, however—and it was this “something” that Jesus challenged and that the Gospel writers finally cast as stereotype. This *something* continues to press down upon us: The questioning spirit of one generation all too often becomes the arrogance of the next. The structures encouraged to bring about spiritual renewal become an end in themselves—and so come to deny the very blessing that they were created to provide.

We can learn from the Pharisees, if we are willing to do so. We can learn about ourselves—and about how to shape more constructively our passion for God. The Pharisees’ fatal flaw was also their greatest strength: They wanted their faith to define the way they lived. They wanted their habits and choices to flow out of a ceaseless response to God.

We are like the Pharisees

when we long to see our lives more thoroughly reflect our love of God. We echo their interests and commitments when we go on retreats, seek to develop a consistent prayer life, consider the implications of compassion and seek to act on them.

But...we are like them, too, when our desire to respond to God becomes a thing of constriction. We are like Pharisees when we forget the ultimate reality of grace, for example, or when we live in judgment of the spiritual lives of others. When we forget grace, we forget who we are and why we have been created. When we live in judgment, we believe we have cornered the theological and spiritual market.

They longed to light the fires of faith—a faith not only of the mind but of the heart.

We forget the incompleteness of any human knowledge. We put God in a box—or live out of the conviction that we must protect God, from ourselves or from others.

The piety of the Pharisees is important for us. It reminds us of lines we would do well not to cross. And yet, like all piety, all devotion, it is rooted in a longing for God. And that will always remain a mirror for us. **G**

The Rev. Daphne Hamborg, Northfield, Minnesota, works half-time as an interim pastor and half-time as a writer.

Give us this day♦♦

It's in the Book

Marj Leegard

Do you have a favorite recipe book?

Mine is a little hand-written notebook. On the inside cover it says, "From Peggy. Most of these I got from you in the first place." She made it for me when my own recipe books were destroyed in a fire. The recipes have names on them. Mom's Meat Balls, Donna's Coconut Treasure Cake, Doris' Bars, Marj's Chocolate Fudge (which in my old book had been Emma's Fudge!) I have added Myrt's Salad Dressing and pages of instructions for other projects—like 100 popcorn balls. Who can imagine making 100 popcorn balls anymore?

We all have ways of preserving recipes, some more orderly than others. We keep them—and keep adding to them—because they help us in our daily rounds of family care. By identifying the recipe with the person who introduced it to us, we remember the taste and smell and look of the finished product. When I want to make meatballs, I don't want some exotic, pineapple-scented, soy-sauced, garlic-flavored nuggets. I want Mom's Meat Balls. Tested, tried, and true.

I have another book. It has no visible dimensions. I carry it in my head. If my little recipe notebook is stained and worn, this book I carry



in my head is tattered to the 7th power. Its truths came into being in conflict, stress, sorrow, and fear. Its truths are tested and bear the names of the people from whom they were learned. It contains faith-in-daily-life wisdom, as interpreted by friends. And they take me

through my daily rounds.

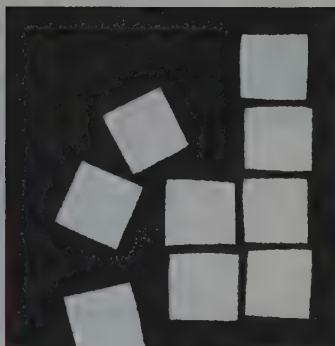
I learned from Jerry's quiet listening "being in full accord and of one mind" (Philippians 2:2b). There are faster ways to plan together but not better ways. Mary taught me to grieve when I didn't want to learn. She dealt with me "with patience, bearing with one another in love" (Ephesians 4:2b). John's page is filled with great joy, and his joy comes from the joy in Luke 24:52-53: "And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God." John continually teaches me to see the joy.

My little book of recipes and my invisible book of directions for life are gifts from the experiences of others. How blessed we are to have friends whose recipes and faithful lives fill our notebooks. **G**

LWT columnist Marj Leegard is from Detroit Lakes, Minnesota.

Jesus: The Messiah Among Us

Carolyn Keller



Session 10: The Rebel Study Text: Luke 5:17- 6:11

Memory Verse

“But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins”—he said to the one who was paralyzed—“I say to you, stand up and take your bed and go to your home” (Luke 5:24).

Overview

Although the Pharisees were experts in God’s law, they were not prepared for God’s radical love revealed in Jesus. Nor did Jesus make any effort to be diplomatic. Instead, he deliberately created conflict with the Pharisees—publicly forgiving people’s sins, eating with tax collectors and sinners, and breaking Sabbath laws. His point was to undermine the piety of the Pharisees so that they and everyone they taught could receive God’s grace.

In this session, we will explore Jesus’ role as a trouble-maker. We will also consider how the Holy Spirit has called and continues to call individuals to stir up controversy among believers so that the church can be reformed.

Opening

Pray together the Prayer of the Day for Reformation Day:
Almighty God, gracious Lord, pour out your Holy Spirit upon your faithful people. Keep them steadfast in your Word, protect and comfort them in all temptations, defend them against all their enemies, and bestow on the church your saving peace; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (*Lutheran Book of Worship*, p. 36).



Jesus' Authority

For us, Jesus' authority is not a surprise. We confess that Jesus is "true God" and "of one Being with the Father" (Nicene Creed, *LBW*, p. 84). We can only imagine what it was like for people in his day to see a carpenter from the small town of Nazareth telling people their sins were forgiven. It would have seemed arrogant and crazy if it had not been for Jesus' amazing miracles. Clearly, Jesus had power like a prophet, but was he a true or false prophet? The Pharisees knew God's warnings about false prophets well. They had studied scriptures like Deuteronomy 13:1-4.

1. Read Deuteronomy 13:1-4 and indicate whether the following statements about false prophets are true or false.

- _____ A false prophet's omens and portents would never happen.
- _____ A false prophet would try to persuade God's people to follow other gods.
- _____ God tests the faithful by sending a false prophet.

The Pharisees questioned and tested Jesus in an attempt to keep themselves and God's people from following a false prophet.

2. Read Luke 5:17-26. Compare Luke 5:21 with Deuteronomy 13:4. When Jesus forgave the paralytic, why do you think it sounded blasphemous to the Pharisees? What was Jesus' response?

Eating with a Tax Collector

After the Pharisees struggled to make sense out of Jesus' healing of the paralytic, Jesus confused them even more by eating with Levi, a tax collector. Tax collectors were known for charging people more than the Roman government required for taxes and keeping the excess amount for themselves. The Pharisees wondered why, if Jesus claimed to be holy, he would associate with those who oppressed God's people by stealing from them.

3. **Read Luke 5:27—6:1.** Imagine a religious leader in our day socializing with someone you or your community would consider an enemy—for example, someone who had profited from the mismanagement of a savings and loan, or someone you know has been cheating people of your community in his or her business. How do you think people in the church would react?



In the episode with Levi, Jesus clearly stated that he came to call sinners to repentance (see Luke 5:32), yet Jesus' own disciples did not seem to repent. To the Pharisees, they seemed intentionally to disobey God's law. Instead of fasting so that their sins might be forgiven, as John's disciples did, Jesus' disciples ate where and when they were hungry.

4. **Read Luke 5:33-39.** Jesus compared the piety of the Pharisees to an old garment or an old wineskin. How do you interpret this? Do you think Jesus recognized how hard it was for the Pharisees to accept the new freedom of the kingdom? Do you think the freedom God wants to give people is still difficult to accept? Explain.

Sabbath Laws

Jesus' loyalty to God continued to be suspect in the Pharisees' minds when Jesus allowed his disciples to break the Sabbath laws. Plucking grain on the Sabbath was considered work. In the judgment of the Pharisees, the disciples were not keeping the Third Commandment—they were not keeping the Sabbath holy (see Exodus 20:8-11).



5. Read Luke 6:1-5. How did Jesus respond to the Pharisees' complaints?

On another Sabbath, Jesus healed a man with a withered hand. The man's condition was not life-threatening, and Jesus could have waited until the next day.

6. Read Luke 6:6-11. What did Jesus reveal about God by healing the man with the withered hand immediately?

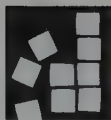
Luke's account of Jesus' series of conflicts with the Pharisees ended for the moment with the Pharisees discussing what they might do to Jesus (6:11). In Luke, they were not thinking of killing him. In fact, in Luke 13:31, it was the Pharisees who warned Jesus to go away because Herod wanted to destroy him. Still, the gospel shows that there was no middle ground with Jesus. Eventually his authority had to be accepted or rejected. In the end, it was rejected by everyone, and he was crucified as he and Scripture had predicted (see Luke 9:22; 24:26).

Our Rebellion

Some of the complaints the Pharisees had against Jesus—like disobeying Sabbath laws and not fasting—are not offensive to us. However, this is not true for all of the complaints they raised. Jesus' authority to forgive sins and extend the kingdom to everyone continues to confront us.

At the time of the Reformation, Jesus' remarkable freedom to forgive and welcome was a rallying point for the Reformers. Arguing against a system where people had to pay money to priests to avoid punishment for their sins, Martin Luther brought many in the church back to an understanding of grace as God's free gift.

There are plenty of ways this grace still troubles us today. Luther suggested that the most basic sin—our original sin—is unbelief. It is so hard to believe that God is really God, to trust that God's love in Jesus is real and “for you,” and to believe that



God is in charge. Like the Pharisees, we so quickly rebel against God's grace by turning our attention away from the gift of God's love. Instead, we focus on earning God's favor by following or making the rules. We deny God's power in us by refusing to claim the gifts God has given us, not believing that we are so fearfully and wonderfully made. We'll do anything to have some control.

God is the one with the power to forgive and save—no one else. Any other savior is a false prophet. We rebel in our distraction by so many other objects and ideas that promise to love us. Jesus rebels right back—we cannot deter God's affection for us or for anyone else by turning away from or trying to take over the distribution of that affection.

7. Our culture has a lot to say about how we are supposed to look, act, and think. What messages have been destructive for you? How might Jesus' word of love rebel against these messages? How might God's grace give you the courage to rebel against them?

Free Grace

Often we think of grace as a gift that we receive when we are sorry for our sins. Yet it is God's grace that allows us to see that we are sinners in the first place. Paul, a Pharisee who considered himself blameless under God's law (see Philippians 3:6), was given the grace that allowed him to see a crucified man as the Messiah, not as one cursed by God (see Galatians 3:13 and Deuteronomy 21:22-23). It was God's grace, working through the Holy Spirit, that allowed early Jewish believers to make their way through a church conflict to a resolution. Because of it, Gentiles were accepted into the church without being required to adhere to Jewish laws (see Acts 15:1-32).

8. Today in the church, we face many issues on a congregational level, as a larger church, and as part of the global Christian community. Is it possible to distinguish between conflict that is harmful and conflict that is led by the Holy Spirit and can reform the church? Explain.



Because the church is made up of people who are simultaneously saints and sinners, the church will always need reformation. We all stand at the foot of the cross, guilty in various ways. What holds us together in our differences is the forgiving love of Christ. If we lose sight of this, we have nothing.

9. Think of a church reform you initially shrank from or opposed, but that you later came to appreciate and support. What changed your mind?

Looking Ahead

Session 11, "The Righteous Judge," prepares us for Christ the King Sunday on November 24 by examining Jesus' ultimate power as judge over all the nations. In preparation, **read Matthew 25:31-46; 26:26-29** and memorize Matthew 25:40: "And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'" **GCA**

About the Author

Writer and speaker Carolyn Keller is a graduate of Luther Northwestern Seminary (now Luther Seminary). She has served as a parish pastor and currently is coordinator of the Growth in Excellence in Ministry Program for the Minneapolis Area Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. She and her husband, the Rev. John V. Keller, have three children, Jonathan (8), Suzanne (6), and Christina (3).

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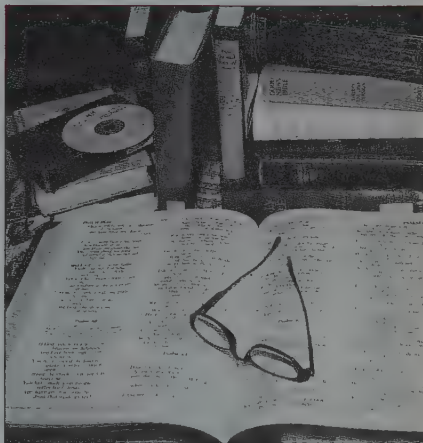
How Did Your Bible Grow?

Terence E. Fretheim

The word *Bible* comes from a Greek word that means “books.” One helpful way to describe the Bible is to say it is a collection of books. These books were written by many different authors over the course of more than 1000 years. So, while the Bible is a book, it is also many books. You could say the Bible is a book of books.

Lutheran, and other Protestant, Bibles contain 66 books. While the Bibles of all Christians contain these books, the Bibles of some church bodies have several additional Old Testament books. We will look at this topic next month.

The Bible is more than simply a collection of books. The word *Bible* (or *Scriptures*) also designates those books that are authoritative for the faith and life of the Christian community. Another word used to refer to this list of books is *canon*; these books are called the *canonical* books. The constitution of the ELCA uses the following language in its basic statement about the Bible: “This church accepts the canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the inspired Word of God and the authoritative source



and norm of its proclamation, faith, and life.” We will also speak about this statement in later months.

How were all these books gathered together to form our Bible? It’s a complicated story, and we don’t know all the details.

We do know, however, that these books were not recognized as “Bible” when they were first written. Authors did not set out to write books to be included in the Bible. Indeed, these authors would no doubt be surprised to see what has happened to their books!

We also know that the canon did not come into being all at once—it was a gradual process. The Bible “grew” in stages over the course of

several centuries. Two main phases in this process can be identified.

First, individual books were used throughout the years in teaching and in worship. This happened both in the Jewish community (for those books that became the Hebrew Bible, what Christians call the Old Testament), and in the Christian community (for those books that became the New Testament). As these books were used, they became more and more authoritative.

Second, at various times and places these books were officially recognized as canonical—that is, part of the Bible—but we do not know exactly how or when.

The Old Testament

The books of the Old Testament were written over the course of many centuries, with the last book written about 165 B.C. Although how and when these books became canonical is uncertain, three major developments can be noted:

1. The Law—Genesis through Deuteronomy—was first recognized as Holy Scripture, probably by 400 B.C. or so. This may be the “book of the law of Moses” publicly recognized in Nehemiah 8:1-18.

2. The Prophets—Joshua through 2 Kings (except Ruth), Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the twelve minor prophets—were next recognized as Scripture, probably by 200 B.C.

3. The Writings—the other Old Testament books. This section remained undefined until 90-100 A.D., more than 60 years after Jesus’ death. About that time, the Jewish community in Palestine

placed its seal of approval on the present 39 books of the Hebrew Bible. This development recognized the stature that these books, one by one, had attained during earlier years. The Christian church was not bound by Jewish decisions, of course, and this third section of the canon remained loosely defined for Christians for many years (more on this in next month’s column).

The New Testament

The New Testament books were written over the course of about 50 years (50-100 A.D.). These books were written for several reasons. First, early Christians recognized the need to preserve the memory of Jesus’ life and teachings. Also, as the number of Christian converts increased throughout the Mediterranean world, it became important to provide instruction regarding the essentials of the Christian faith. These books enjoyed widespread use in the churches in the years after they were written.

How and when these books became canonical for Christians is uncertain. Certainly by 200 A.D. the letters of Paul and the Gospels—and probably several other books—were considered canonical. The status of a few books varied for a time, depending on the needs and interests of Christians in various areas. The New Testament as we now know it was probably not firmly in place until about 350 A.D.

Over the next few issues, we’ll look at some of the implications of the way this “book of books” became the Bible as we know it. **G**

The Rev. Terence E. Fretheim is professor of Old Testament at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota.

All We Like Sheep

Thank God

We are all so open-minded

That we earnestly ask questions

From all we know will agree with us,

And search diligently all Scriptures

That we're already sure

Will support our positions.

We joyfully "Amen" all speakers

Who say just what we hoped

They would say,

Then, gloriously justified,

We praise God

For confirming once more the "truths"

God must weep to hear. G

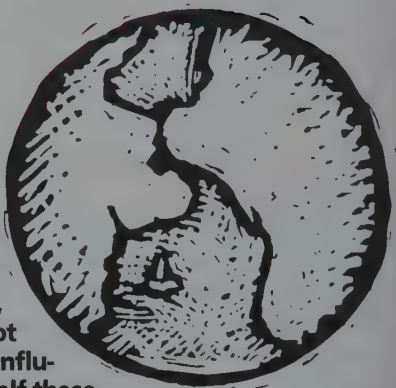
*Bonnie Compton Hanson
Santa Ana, California*

What would happen if...?

Upside-Down Thinking

Garlinda Burton

Most of us never think about it, but our race, ethnicity, culture, and language have a lot to do with who our friends are, where we worship, how we worship, and how we communicate. These are not the only influences, but they are major influences. If you don't believe this, ask yourself these questions:



- What 20th-century religious figure has been most influential in your personal and professional development? Whom do you pattern yourself after?
- If somebody asked you to pick out 'the ideal cute child' from a multiracial group of children, or a really beautiful woman, or a really handsome man, for a brochure, photograph, or video, what would they look like? In other words, when you're thinking of good-looking folks, what is your type?

Twenty years ago, when I lived in North Carolina and wasn't stretching myself beyond my own culture—because I, like most of you, operate in a pretty monocultural world most of the time—I'd have probably answered: Martin Luther King Jr., and Zan Holmes for leaders, and actors Halle Berry or Wesley Snipes for good-looking folks.

However, because I have been exposed to—and lived, worked, loved, and worshiped in—a multicultural reality (the result of joining the United Methodist Church staff at a time when inclusiveness was important to many of my mentors), I am now more likely to think "upside down." Now the people that would come to mind would represent a variety of racial groups.

As a child I never worshiped in any church but a predominantly Black and American one. But thanks to my work, I have been exposed to religious people and preachers from

many countries, and so when somebody asks me who's the best preacher, I can turn my thinking upside down, and those who might formerly have been invisible to me now rise to the top of my mind. I might say that William Sloan Coffin, or Jorge Gonzalez, or Desmond Tutu, or Chaim Potok, or Ignacio Castuera are among the greatest religious speakers I've ever heard.

A colleague of mine in our mission agency in New York City has a very interesting map of the world on his wall. On it, Antarctica, Australia, Africa, South America, and China are at the top; Europe and the United States are on the bottom. It is not meant to be a literal representation of the globe, but is called "Another View of World Order." Think about it: What would happen if our secular news media, if our world economy, if our religious work was centered in the Southern Hemisphere and worked outward, instead of being centered in the Northern Hemisphere?

More than likely, English and French would not be our first languages—Spanish and Mandarin and Swahili and Xhosa would be. The news about Africa and South America would not be relegated to the back pages of the world-news section of the paper (and only then when there's a civil war or famine). We'd probably know the names of the kings and princesses of those countries...who the prince of Madagascar left his wife for, and who's getting what castle in the divorce. Think about how much you know about Prince Charles's and Princess Diana's lives right now, and compare that to how much you know about the ruler of Thailand or the president of Paraguay. The British monarchy's troubles interest you more than the infidelities of the ruler in Tonga, because you "know" Charles and Di—because our current way of looking at the world deems them more important than the Tongan ruler.

If we thought upside down, business news in the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* would report the ups and downs of the currency in Zimbabwe. We don't even know the names of most of the money used in the Southern Hemisphere, except for maybe the yen and the Krugerrand—but we know the German mark, the French franc, the British pound. Upside-down thinking brings a different part of the world to the top.

Why is it important to think upside down? Some of us are tired of talking about race and culture, and we feel ourselves drawing up and tuning out painful discussions about our continuing racial divisions. But have you noticed that whenever

we recoil and tune it out, all of a sudden something happens and we find ourselves in a chillier and more despairing racial climate than ever before? It is the 1990s, and everybody loves the basketball star Michael Jordan, right? So how did Louis Farrakhan and Pat Buchanan take center stage with their rhetoric of hatred in such an enlightened and color-blind society? It is the 1990s, and our kids go to desegregated schools and we've come a long way since the 1960s, right? So how did our urban areas become racially polarized war zones where disagreements turn deadly and young men are gunned down before their 21st birthdays?

Why do we try to silence discussions about respect for racial and cultural differences by saying, "If we could just stop talking about differences and all just be Americans..."? The hard facts, and the Word of God, tell us that it is not my race that is the problem—it is *intolerance* of, *disregard* for, and *subjugation* of my race, or your race, or his race, or her culture, or their language—that is the real problem.

Upside-down thinking is important to us as people of faith because it gets us thinking about what our world can become if each of us would use our influence to work to make God's world the way it is meant to be. We cannot invite people to join us in our faith if we don't present our churches as places that welcome all people. People who are not from your racial or ethnic group are unlikely to join your congregation if the image you show them does not say that their language, their culture, their very presence would be welcomed there.

We cannot welcome people who are not like us if we only rely on a narrow view of the world as the framework for our ministries. We've got to learn to think upside down, and envision and communicate a vision of God's creation that values and welcomes—as God welcomes—people who don't look, talk, and think like us, but who have gifts to bring and stories to share. **G**



Garlinda Burton is editor of Interpreter, a magazine of the United Methodist Church. She is a specialist in racial and gender images in the media, and conducts training on combating racism and sexism in the media. This article is excerpted from an address to the Religious Public Relations Council Convention in Dallas in March 1996.

The Power of *Forgiveness*

Robin J. McCullough

He didn't tell his story immediately. In fact, we had driven for several hours through the former Black township nestled by the beautiful Drakensburg Mountain area of South Africa before his story unfolded.

As we drove, enjoying the scenery, our conversation drifted to various topics such as the schools, churches, and homes.

He, a 45-year-old Black man, and I, a White woman, freely talked as if the apartheid system that had separated Blacks and Whites in South Africa was a mere page in an ancient history book. Instead, the reality of South Africa remains precarious as it struggles daily through the transition from apartheid to democracy.

By chance I asked if he had lived long in this area. He seemed startled and glanced at me with a strange expression.

His reaction surprised me. I did not think it was an odd question. We mobile North Americans often ask new acquaintances, "Have you lived here long?"

Later I realized it was an absurd question to ask a Black man



Robin McCullough, center, with members of youth choir from Mawa parish.

who lived under an apartheid system. Blacks were denied freedom to choose where to live or when to move. He had not chosen this area. It was chosen for him.

Slowly, he told me his story. He was about seven years old when the police came to his neighborhood. This was not their first visit. Like most days, he and other children were playing outside while the adults were away at work.

But on this visit, the police destroyed the neighborhood homes, loaded up the children in trucks and took them away. When the parents came home, they were devastated. They had no idea which direction to

**A founder of the
Leolo congregation.**

look for their children. After much searching, some of the parents were able to find their children. Later he learned it was part of the government's policy of "removal."

I was speechless.

How could he tell these stories with such calm? Finally I asked him, "Where is your bitterness or anger?" Then, it was his turn to be speechless.

Finally he responded out of the depths of his being, "I am Christian. As Christians, we forgive. It is time to move forward."

It did not take me long to learn that his story was not unique in South Africa. Time and time again I heard stories of the atrocities of the past. Yet these stories somehow became background music to deep, heart-felt songs of God's love, forgiveness, and victory. Clearly it was God who led the people through the valley of death to a path of forgiveness. It was God who sustained them through their times of trial.

No doubt, some of the people of South Africa will not be able to forgive. And some who have experienced pain will choose the path of revenge or hatred. A few will not let go of the past. That is true in any land. That can be true of anyone who has been deeply hurt in life. It is difficult to forgive. Sometimes it feels impossible.

But by the grace of God, this man had moved on. So have countless others. As we gathered in churches in South Africa, people sang, danced, and celebrated the love of Christ. It was the very love of Christ that overflowed in abundant gestures and acts of hospitality.



To face such faith is a staggering thing. Make no mistake: The wounds and scars are real and deep. The atrocities are many. No one I met tried to deny the hurt, or the depth of the pain, or the wrongs that occurred. All of that is real.

Nevertheless, God's pattern is revealed. Once more God stirs the hearts of brothers and sisters in Christ to follow a radical path. It is the path of forgiveness.

The witness of those in South Africa is not meant to stay across the ocean. They are a challenge and invitation for any of us who have been hurt in life. Forgiveness is an extraordinary occurrence that opens the heart to unmatched joy and love. Forgiveness is God at work creating something new. Thanks be to God! **C**

The Rev. Robin J. McCullough serves St. John Lutheran, Canal Fulton, Ohio. In January 1996, she visited the Northern Diocese of Southern Africa. Her hosts were parish partners developed through the ELCA Companion Synod Program.

Women in Transition

Sue M. Setzer

Planners worried that no one would come, but the four-week "Women in Transition" seminar filled quickly. From 26 to 67 years of age, the 12 women came with diverse motivations. Two experiences bound them together. Their lives were turned upside down, and in their confusion they yearned to hear God's call.

Here are a few of their stories. Their names are changed to protect their privacy.

At 67, Rachel was relieved to be away from the fast-paced executive world that had been her primary vocation. Now retired, she felt a gnawing emptiness. Surely God had something more for her to do. How would she know?

Beside her sat Liz, a new mom who was going crazy staying at home full-time. She missed the excitement of her former career in finance. At the same time, she wanted to give her child her full attention. Liz felt guilty no matter what she did. What was God's will?

At 51, Jan was facing her first job search. The man she left college to marry had divorced her for someone else. She could no longer find her sense of call in being a corporate wife, mother of two, community and church volunteer. Now what?

Maria prayed for a change. Her workload at a computer design firm had soared since the company downsized six months ago. Management then announced that anyone who could not put in 60 hours a week should resign. Forty-five, single again, and exhausted, she was her sole means of support. What was God's word to her now?

The other women poured out similar stories. Fear of job loss. Empty-nest syndrome. Death of a husband. A vague awareness that life could be fuller. As leader, even my life was shifting. A



sense of call to be a Diaconal Minister in the ELCA led me to search for a part-time seminary program.

Running Errands for God

Together we learned about God's call. Dr. Donald Heiges writes that at baptism, God calls everyone into God's family (*The Christian's Calling*, Fortress Press, 1984). *Everyone*, not merely pastors and rostered lay ministers. God's call in baptism is first to come together around the table to be nourished by the Word and

the Eucharist. Then God sends us out on errands for which God fully equips us. Martin Luther made it clear that God's call, or vocation, is not only a call to work. God calls us to be

God calls us to be "little Christs" in all our relationships—family, friends, church, and community, as well as occupations.

"little Christs" in all our relationships—family, friends, church, and community, as well as occupations. Vocation is the call to be Christ-like and to put faith into action.

For many of us, running errands began early. As a child I loved to run errands for my granny. When I was 10, Granny broke her hip and needed a walker to get around. Granny would often call me from play and ask me to run an errand for her. Each time she would give me all the money I would need and a little extra for candy. I'd hop on my shiny blue bike, pigtails flapping, and fly to the grocery store. I was delighted to take on what seemed like a high-risk adventure for Granny because she needed me.

God's Call

That's the way it is when God calls us to run errands. The mission is the same for every Christian. We are called to invest our God-given gifts to meet the urgent needs in the world, all for Christ's sake. Specific errands are matched to our distinctive gifts and the needs that require them. Relationships, needs, and gifts are central in discerning God's call.

Relationships. I looked forward to running errands for Granny because I loved her and she showered me with the unconditional love reserved for grandparents. Our relationship with God determines how we answer God's call. Listening and speaking in prayer. Worshiping around the table. Studying God's Word in Scripture. Spreading the good news to and with others. These are a few ways the women at the seminar prepared to hear God's call.

Needs. Granny's errands always had a purpose. So do God's. The women in transition identified various needs that called for their

attention. Together we ran errands for God as wives and mothers, daughters and sisters, employers and employees, citizens and volunteers. Each of us discerned specific needs that captured our attention, both at home and beyond.

Gifts. Granny never asked me to do more than I was able, but she would challenge me to risk and stretch a bit. Also, she made sure I had the basic equipment for the particular errand. Likewise, God the caller provides all we need. The equipment comes in the form of gifts created in our very being. The Holy Spirit can uplift and transform our abilities in order to build up the church and its mission in the world. During the seminar, the women identified their different gifts through reflective inventories and community feedback.

Women in Community

So, how did the seminar end? Few participants made clear-cut decisions, but each had a framework for making choices. Our relationships with God and with the Christian community were strengthened. We recognized many of our God-given gifts and identified major needs in the world around us. And we taught each other much about faith and life.

Because of her discernment, Rachel paid attention to what her neighbors in the retirement community had been saying. They wanted someone to organize activities for them and Rachel had ample gifts to meet that need.

For the first time Liz appreciated parenthood as a calling from God. She also affirmed her vocation in finance by figuring out ways to stay in contact with her former colleagues and preparing for part-time work later.

Jan was surprised to learn that her story was not unique. As a first step out of a victim role, she identified several courses to take at the local college while resuming her volunteer work.

With support from the group, Maria made a proposal to her supervisor to work fewer hours. Much to her surprise, her proposal was accepted because Maria was such a valuable employee.

And what about me? I discovered a summer program that leads to a Master of Lay Ministry degree. On my 50th birthday, I mailed an application to Trinity Lutheran Seminary as a part-time student and candidate for Diaconal Ministry in the ELCA. I hope to graduate before I am 60. That will still give me time to run many more errands for God. **G**

Sue M. Setzer is an associate in ministry in the ELCA and associate director of the Career and Personal Counseling Service in Charlotte, North Carolina. She is co-author, with Walter R. Bouman, of What Shall I Say? Discerning God's Call to Ministry.



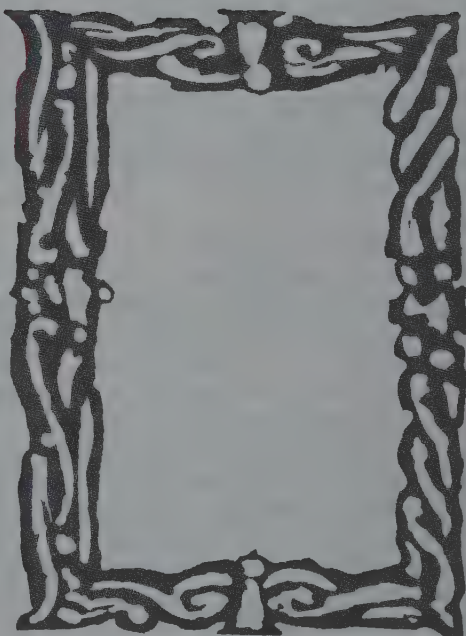
What does God look like?

Expressing the Holy

Jean M. Blomquist

Once, while walking through a museum, I stopped in front of a painting of God. I don't remember now who the artist was, or what century it was painted, but the image remains clear: a bearded old man with long white hair, clothed in a dazzling white robe. I both nodded in recognition and grimaced in pain. The image evoked my primary childhood experience of God: distant, judgmental, vengeful.

Then I encountered a very different image of God in an exhibit at a seminary: a feminine image of the crucified Christ. This sculpture was startling and unsettling, yet also filled with beauty and power. What if, I wondered, God could know and suffer my deepest pain? What if God, instead of being distant and removed, was as close as, or even closer than, my very self? Some denounced this depiction as blasphemy; others were deeply moved, feeling that for the first time, they were included in the humanity and saving action of Christ. For me, "Christa" (as sculptor Edwina Sandys calls it)



What would you put in this frame to represent your image(s) of God?

blatantly challenged my images of God, even as it drew me into an unexpected and uneasy encounter with the holy.

The "old-man God" conjured up painful, difficult memories for me: feelings of never being good enough, of being totally sinful and inevitably condemned. Sandys's image of the crucifixion was also painful and difficult, but in different way. Her art-

work challenged me to see another facet of God, to move beyond familiar images and to open myself to unfamiliar expressions of God's presence in my life. Still, I'm not sure which image of God scared me more—the vengeful old man or the vulnerable Christa.

As my spiritual journey continued, I found solace and depth in non-human images of God: the surging power of the ocean; the immense sweep of deep blue sky; the rich, deep-brown fecundity of the earth. These images nourished me: both my wonder and my certainty of the holy grew.

What do our images of God tell us about God—and about ourselves? We are, the writer of Genesis tells us, made in the image of God. Our deepest identity is steeped in and shaped by who God is. Through the ages, as people sought to know God and themselves, they used images to help comprehend the Holy, to help make the mystery of God a bit more accessible, and to express their intimate encounters with God.

The images we use, hear, and embrace *reflect* what we have been taught, what we have experienced, and what we believe. They also *shape* how we live, worship, relate to others, and feel about ourselves.

If we believe that God is good, loving, and kind, we will seek also to be good, loving, and kind—not only with others but with ourselves as well. We will see the world through the lens of love—not in some

Pollyanna way, but by claiming the deeply transformative power of love, even in the face of evil, hatred, and cruelty. If we believe that God is judgmental, harsh, and vindictive, we may act in a similar way—or we may live in constant fear of what God will do to us and others. If we believe that God is totally “other,” we may experience the inexorable mystery of God—or we may feel that God, like an unapproachable superior, has no interest in connecting with us and our everyday lives.

When we experience difficult times in our spiritual lives, it may be because we are leaving old images of God behind, but haven't yet found new ones to express the reality and vitality of the holy in our lives. It may feel as if God has died or we have lost our faith. Perhaps when our world is turned upside-down, we have a good perspective to look at God in new ways.

Images lead us more deeply into the mystery and familiarity of God. Since our images can never fully express the holy, we need a wealth of

Images lead us more deeply into the mystery and familiarity of God.

images to reveal God ever more clearly. If we have only one image of God, we can easily slip into complacency, thinking that we know the fullness of God and God's manifestations and actions in us and in the world. We may turn our images into idols or cudgels to intimidate or control ourselves or others. Our images may come to reflect more of who *we*

Perhaps when our world is turned upside down, we look at God in new ways.

are (or who holds the power in our culture) than who God is.

In *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life* writer Anne Lamott quotes one of her friends, who says, "You can safely assume you've created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do."

God continually calls us beyond false images—of ourselves, of others, and of the holy. We each are called toward our truest self, which has its fullest identity in the true God. We need images that reflect this. We need images that comfort and nurture us as well as ones that startle us out of complacency and spiritual apathy. We need images of grace, power, compassion,

and even humor, for I suspect God is much less stodgy than we tend to think.

Images help us to comprehend, embrace, and emulate aspects of God—to experience and concretely express the presence of the holy in the world through our lives each day. They remind us not only of the immensity and mystery of the holy, but also the graciousness and familiarity of God-with-us. From the mother hen to the soaring eagle, from the surging ocean to the endless sky, from the artwork Christa to the old man in flowing white robe, images can be windows to the holy. They help us see God. **G**

Jean M. Blomquist, Berkeley, California, works in the area of spiritual formation as a writer, speaker, workshop/retreat facilitator, and spiritual director. She is author of Wrestling Till Dawn: Awakening to Life in Times of Struggle (Upper Room Books, 1994).

Now It's Your Turn

If, as author Jean Blomquist says, images of God can be "windows to the holy," how does the holy come into your life? How do you see God? How do you picture God, and how does that affect your life and faith? Tell us about it in 300 words or less, and send to "Windows," Lutheran Woman Today, 8765 W. Higgins Rd., Chicago, IL 60631-4189. Letters must be postmarked by November 1, 1996. A future issue of LWT will report on the responses.

Continuing Reformation

Grace Adolphsen Brame

The church cannot live without continual reformation. "Die daily!" was Luther's teaching. That means, let self-centeredness die. Let go of anything that stands between us and God. Let go of anything that fractures our common ministry. Let go of whatever stands in the way of empowering, transformative love.

Do we need to recall that the church is composed entirely of imperfect human beings? Luther reminded us that we are not only beloved children of God, but completely inadequate without God's grace.

Luther taught that life is meant to be a process of sanctification, of growing in God, a process completed only in heaven. He said: "This life, therefore, is not righteousness, but growth in righteousness; not health, but healing; not being, but becoming; not rest, but exercise. We are not yet what we shall be, but we are growing toward it. The process is not yet finished, but it is going on. This is not the end, but it is the road. All does not yet gleam in glory, but all is being purified."*

That is what continual reformation is: the process of purification, of stretching exercises, of the grace of growth, and of healing. Begun and continued by grace, it includes repentance and forgiveness; discipleship and discipline; letting go and adding on; commitment to God and cooperation with each other.

We are all called. We are called to continual transformation of ourselves, our church, and the world. But we cannot do it! Only God can do it. And God will do it in us and through us, if we say yes.

It is scary. It is hard to perceive the possibility of a victorious God working through our mere selves. But faith is trust.

* Translated by William Lazareth from *Luthers Werke*, Weimar Ausgabe, V7, 337, 30.

The spirit moves continually. And if it moves, neither we nor the church can be a frozen structure, glued to some small part of the past and closed to all ideas but our own.

Faith is hanging on to the God we cannot see (Hebrews 11:1-3). We depend. And we keep on and on depending. "Faith is the 'Yes' of the heart," wrote Luther, "on which we stake our lives!"

Even the most ordinary member of the church has an extraordinary calling.

Yet pride, status, power, money, perfectionism, and a claim of exclusive righteousness stand in the way of truly being the body of Christ.

And something else stands in the way: the fear to stick our necks out. In Old Testament terms, it is the fear to be prophetic. Laity and clergy alike are infected with this fear. The church of the Reformation teaches the "ministry of all believers," but most of us do not believe it, nor do we dare to live it.

There is a third thing we miss: the promise and the gift of the Holy Spirit. We can hardly accept that God really does enter and empower people like us! Yet the church exists only because God poured out the Spirit on *all* people who would receive it, who "heard the word" with their hearts (see Acts 10:44).

Reformation and Repentance

It is no accident that Luther's *Ninety-five Theses* begins with the subject of repentance. Without it, no reformation could ever happen.

Luther wrote: "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, 'Repent' (Matthew 4:17), he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance." Thus, continuing reformation is empowered by continuing repentance until the end of life.

Does the concept of repentance as empowerment seem strange? So often we think of repentance as being stuck in the grime of guilt, rather than being freed to new possibilities; as self-punishment, rather than heartfelt reception of God's forgiving grace.

Luther asked for both inner and outer repentance, a purging of our insidious self-centeredness as well as a new way of life, a "re-forming" of life. Luther knew that resurrection is always connected with some kind of death.

In the Old Testament, the most common term for repentance is *shuv*. It is translated: to turn around, to turn back (to God), to face in another direction, to change one's mind, or conversion. In short, *repentance* is a word for radical change. It begins with honesty and ends in freedom. Repentance is a word of sorrow and a word of hope. —GAB

Even the most ordinary member of the church has an extraordinary calling. Each and every one of us is asked to be a light in the darkness, a voice in the emptiness, a hand reaching into loneliness. We, "the salt of the earth," are all desperately needed to flavor, enhance, purify, preserve, and heal the world and creation from wherever we stand within it. Martin Luther and Dietrich Bonhoeffer both insisted that is why believers are scattered throughout the earth, even among their enemies.

Every grain of salt is needed! But the church could die unless a true ministry of the laity becomes a reality very soon. The next reformation must empower the laity to be who they are called to be. And the next reformation is due tomorrow!

The Spirit of Life is a spirit of fire, a wind, a breath of fresh air. The Spirit *moves* continually. And if it moves, neither we nor the church can be a frozen structure, glued to some small part of the past and closed to all ideas but our own.

The Spirit is not the possession of a few people in particular positions. It does not come to us by training of the brain, but by opening of the heart and yielding of the will, which Luther called "surrender." Jesus had no position in society or the religious hierarchy. Yet the Spirit lived and breathed through him who prayed: "Thy will, not mine, be done."

Perhaps we are called to "bloom where we are planted." Or maybe we are asked to make a radical change in attitude, location, training, or lifestyle. Surely we are not called to be great, or to do great things, in order to boost our ego. But each of us is called to bless the world, to give it life, and to empower it.

A magnificent promise is given us: "You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses..." (Acts 1:8, Revised Standard Version). **G**

Grace Adolphsen Brame, Ph.D., teaches the integration of theology and spirituality at LaSalle University, Philadelphia. She is the author of Receptive Prayer (Chalice) and editor of The Ways of the Spirit (Crossroad).

Repentance is a word for radical change. It begins with honesty and ends in freedom.

Brief Prayers on News Items

Sonia C. Solomonson

Your daily prayer list

What news stories caught your attention in the last few days? You can do something about those people and concerns—add them to your prayer list. You might pray for:

- People who experience loss due to fire, flood, and other disasters.
- Those who make the news only as statistics: runaway children, those who are homeless, unemployed, and others.
- Voters who are caught in the midst of often-meaningless rhetoric and image-making political campaigns.
- Bosnians, Croats, Serbs, and Muslims, as they try to live side by side once again.

Fingers do the talking

Karen Stetins works up to 18 hours a week using her sign-language skills for churches, business meetings, doctors' appointments, seminars, and conventions. She first learned sign language when she was secretary at Ridge Lutheran Church in Chicago, a congregation with people who are deaf and hearing-impaired. "For me, it's a matter of how many people we haven't been reaching," Stetins says. "There have been deaf people in churches, but how do you reach them if they don't know the language?"

Nurturing God, help us to reach out to all in our midst.

Adult forum explodes myths

Members of Trinity Lutheran Church, Freeland, Washington, understand more about domestic abuse since an adult forum series was held in their church. They learned that abuse really does happen among middle-class, church-going people; and they learned how to help those in abusive relationships. The members—including high-school youth—learned danger signals to watch for in dating situations, and they learned that abuse can be verbal, physical, or psychological.

God of all goodness, make us ever aware of problems around us and of possible ways we might help.

Tanzanian and U.S. teachers team up

Earlier this year 10 Tanzanian teachers fanned out across five ELCA synods for a seven-week stay. They were partners with ELCA members who are high-school teachers, visiting U.S. classrooms and congregations. In June the U.S. teachers traveled to Tanzania for a similar experience. These visits mark the beginning of the Partnership in Education program.

Thank you for the ways we learn that global ministry is a mutual learning experience, O God.

Sonia C. Solomonson is a senior editor for The Lutheran.

A Legacy of Love

The journey was long. Thirty-one miles to the airport for a flight to Chicago, then on to Minneapolis, followed by a three-and-one-half-hour drive to Balaton, Minnesota.

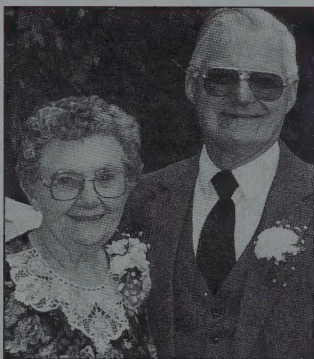
But what a joy to meet Alton and Lorraine Sloan! A wave of nostalgia came over me as I pulled up to their farmhouse. The earthy smells of newly turned fields brought back memories of lazy summer days when my brother, sister, and I vacationed at Grandma's farm more than 40 years ago.

The delectable aroma of freshly cooked vegetables filled the house as Lorraine and Alton greeted me warmly. A gracious cook, Lorraine had prepared a full-scale country-style noontime dinner.

Both in their 70s, the Sloans have been farmers all their lives. Those early years of marriage yielded some difficult times, especially when the weather didn't cooperate. "But God was always there," Lorraine says softly. "He saw us through."

The Sloans have been blessed for 53 years with 232 acres. Now, they decided, it was time to pass on the blessing.

Giving away such a sizable asset was an important decision. After a period of reflection and prayer, the Sloans knew their deci-



sion—and gift—was a good one. The land would fund a charitable trust. It was sold by the ELCA Foundation tax-free. Now the Sloans enjoy these benefits: 1) no capital-gains tax to pay, 2) a large charitable income-tax deduction, 3) income from the trust for their lifetimes, and 4) the joy of know-

ing that, at the end of their lives, a major gift for the Lord's work will be given to Women of the ELCA, the ELCA, and Sillerud Lutheran Church in Balaton.

Their son, Larry, who lives with them, owns the family home and 80 acres of the land. He and his siblings—Joanne, Aris, and Michael—will receive life-insurance benefits.

"We have simplified our lives," says Alton with a peaceful smile. "Our gifts are our expression of gratitude to God. We have much to be thankful for."

So, too, will the countless people who will eventually benefit from the Sloan family's legacy of love.

—Pat Bilow

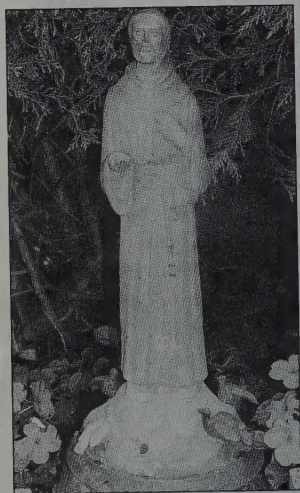
*Director for Planned Giving
Women of the ELCA*

To schedule a planned-giving workshop with Pat Bilow for your cluster or conference, call (800) 638-3522, ext. 2726, or (419) 592-2902.

Francis of Assisi, renewer of the church

Take It Personally, Please!

Stephen P. Gerhard



The ELCA
observes the life
and witness of
Francis of Assisi,
renewer of the
church, on
October 4.

When it comes to biblical literalists, I have a friend who says there are none. Her reasoning: There are no known congregations in which everyone is one-eyed and one-handed! (See Matthew 5:29-30). However, Francis of Assisi, who lived from 1182 to 1226, may be mistaken for someone who took the words of Jesus literally. Actually, he took them personally.

One morning during mass, Francis heard the words of the gospel for the day: "As you go, proclaim the good news, 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.' Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment, give without payment" (Matthew 10:7-8). With these words Jesus sent out the Twelve. Francis took these words to heart. He took them personally.

As Francis left church that day, he responded to Jesus' sending by exchanging his clothing for that of a peasant. The garb of Franciscans was thus designed by the heart of Francis, who, in hearing the gospel, received the sacred heart of Christ.

Tradition reports that Francis became so much the figure of Christ-like mercy that he bore on his own body the *stigmata*—that is, the sacred marks of Christ, the imprint of the nails and the spear. To borrow a saying of Paul, it was no longer Francis who lived, but Christ who lived in him.

What words of Christ do we—do you—take personally? The key lesson from the life of Francis is to take Jesus, the Lord of life, personally. Francis received the grace to take Jesus' words personally. We grow in faith through the example of this saint when we hear the words of Jesus spoken personally to us and take them to heart. **G**

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